# THE COMPLETE PROJECT MANAGER

**Integrating People, Organizational, and Technical Skills**

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## Highlights

# The Complete Project Manager:
## Building the Right Set of Skills for Greater Project Success

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## Abstract

Success in any environment largely depends upon completing successful projects, and successful projects get done by skilled project managers and teams, supported by effective project sponsors. Integration of knowledge and skills makes the difference in achieving optimized outcomes. The Complete Project Manager integrates key technical, people, team, business, and organizational skills. This paper poses an organic analog from molecular chemistry and shares insights, experiences, and examples intended to motivate action towards embracing an integrated approach to the complete project manager.

While many professionals develop their craft through advanced education and on the job experiences, there comes a time when an enhanced skill set and a new perspective about working with people is necessary in order to advance to the next level of performance. How do you move beyond this plateau? This paper provides a holistic approach to open eyes, minds, … and doors, so that changed thinking can be applied immediately within each organizational environment. The "right" set of skills to achieve "completeness" depends on individual starting points, aptitude, attitude, desires, and supporting context.

## Introduction

Many people are not aware of the need for them to change their thinking and of how this mindset inhibits their performance. This paper steps through an argument to adopt, adapt, and apply a different approach, leading to more consistent, timely, and quality results. This can happen because project managers apply necessary leadership, influence, sales, and negotiating skills that had previously been overlooked or under applied. With conscious application of these skills, project managers get recognized through achieving business outcomes that had heretofore eluded them. The goal is to achieve greater levels of personal satisfaction and professional advancement.

Learning Objectives:

- Change thinking about necessary skills to enhance on the job performance
- Apply an organic approach to leading and managing projects
- Realize what needs to be done to achieve better results and how to do it
- Further develop project or program management professional careers

You may embrace the concept of becoming more "complete"…but also harbor many "enemies of change"—such as not invented here, too busy, not enough time, cognitive blindness, natural reactive processes—that inhibit you from adopting better leadership and management practices. Some of these enemies might be ingrained beliefs, harbored over a lifetime of experiences. We cannot change those beliefs; we can only change the believer. The way to do this is to provide enough evidence and examples that tap the internal motivational drives within you. The next step is for you to implement a complete systems approach that achieves greater results, and is simple yet powerfully—and universally—effective.

## Visualization

We use a complex molecule as a metaphoric graphic for the complete project manager. The intent is to apply our own form of bio mimicry to highlight key concepts.

Our visualization is molecular structure as an organic analogy for the complete project manager. With thanks to *Wikipedia.org* and with apologies to the chemical discipline, we map lessons from organic chemistry to the project management profession:

*Organic chemistry is a sub discipline within chemistry involving the scientific study of the structure, properties, composition, reactions, and preparation of carbon-based compounds, hydrocarbons, and their derivatives.*
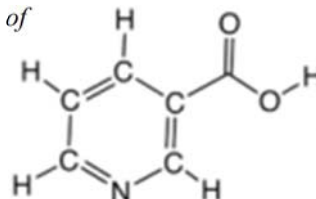
*Organic compounds are structurally diverse. The range of application of organic compounds is enormous. They form the basis of, or are important constituents of, many products and almost all earthly life processes.*

Project management is the application of knowledge, skills and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently. It is a strategic competency for organizations, enabling them to tie project results to business goals and better compete in their markets. Project management brings a unique focus shaped by the goals, resources and schedule of each project. The value of that focus is proved by the rapid, worldwide growth of project management as a recognized and strategic organizational competence in all industries and organizations, as a subject for training and education, and as a career path.

*Organic molecules often contain a higher level of complexity compared to purely inorganic compounds, so the synthesis of organic compounds has developed into one of the most important branches of chemistry. Biochemistry—the chemistry of living organisms, their structure and interactions in a controlled environment and inside living systems—opened up a new chapter of organic chemistry with enormous scope. Biochemistry, like organic chemistry, primarily focuses on compounds containing carbon.*

Upon realizing that project management is all about people, we are struck by the enormous complexity of interests, styles, approaches, and interactive dynamics that get unleashed when attempting cross-organizational project work. Each day brings new challenges, unheralded actions, and innovations. Behind it all, we must never forget that we are carbon-based creatures, enormously capable but seldom perfect.

*The crucial breakthrough for organic chemistry was the concept of chemical structure, wherein carbon atoms could link to each other to form a carbon lattice, and that the detailed patterns of atomic bonding could be discerned by skillful interpretations of appropriate chemical reactions.*

Project management has always been practiced informally, and it began to emerge as a distinct profession in the mid-20th century. The Project Management Institute's *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)* identifies the recurring elements: the five process groups and the nine knowledge areas. While this guide provides a basic structure for projects, linking to other disciplines is crucial for breakthrough performances.

*Early examples of organic reactions and applications were often serendipitous. Then came systematic studies of organic compounds, followed by the synthesis of highly complex molecules via multistep procedures. Total synthesis of complex natural compounds increased in complexity and finally reached commercialization. Pharmaceutical benefits have been substantial. Complexity of total syntheses has been increasing.*

Accidental project managers were, and often still are, common—coming into the profession with little knowledge of processes and procedures. The *PMBOK® Guide* advanced the profession and provides the foundation to build myriad structures capable of producing various outcomes. An ever expanding number of professions and industries are embracing project management, recognizing the benefits of a disciplined approach to create new outcomes. This expansion brings the need for creating new ways to apply established processes…along with the need for

practitioners possessing varied skillsets.  A robust set of skills provides the leadership to fuse disparate groups into new organizations, through organic growth or mergers, and provide novel or innovative solutions.

*Today's research targets feature molecule bearing groups, such that an interchanging of any two groups leads to* stereoisomer *molecules that have the same molecular formula and sequence of bonded atoms but which differ in the three-dimensional orientations of their atoms in space.  Human hands are an example of stereoisomerism—having the same physical properties except for the direction in which they rotate. Two compounds that are mirrors of each other have the same physical properties, except for the direction in which they rotate and how they interact with other compounds. They may have substantially different biological effects.*

No longer will one job description suffice for managing projects, programs, and portfolios.

*In contrast to many inorganic materials, organic compounds typically melt and many boil. The melting and boiling points correlate with the polarity of the molecules and their molecular weight. Organic compounds are usually not very stable at temperatures above 300 °C.*
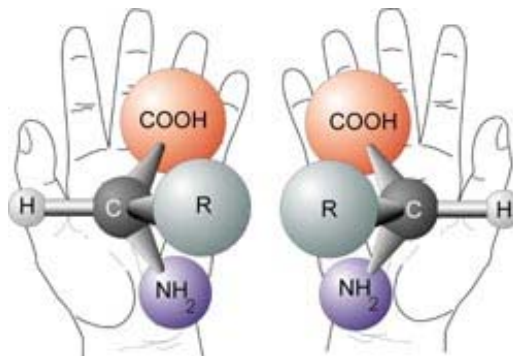
Such is life.  People have their limits, such that they totally disengage and melt away, or they boil over with emotional outbursts.  When these occur correlate both to natural personality inclinations and to a set of developed skills.  Complete project managers achieve enhanced levels of stability.

*Life on Earth is made of left handed amino acids, almost exclusively, because they are made of similar acids that formed in space and fell to Earth in meteorites. Why do amino acids in space favor left? No one really knows, but it is known that radiation can also exist in left and right handed forms.*

New possibilities can emerge with concentrated intent and research.  Is it possible to create right handed molecules? Who knows?  Maybe, because they are known to exist.  As in life itself, unlimited combinations are possible for the molecule surrounding complete project managers.  There are many ways to assemble successful outcomes.  New possibilities will emerge by various combinations of skills.

We make no claims in the following sections to completely cover the topics.  This is not an exhaustive representation nor is it the only way. We offer the picture in Exhibit 1 as a starting point.  Use this picture as a guideline, metric, or outline, and as a journey to build your own "molecules."

**Exhibit 1.  "Molecular" Assessment**

## Leadership and Management Skills

Leadership and management skills are those vital visionary and "can do" competencies so necessary when in a position to influence colleagues, team members, upper managers, clients, and so forth. The complete project manager possesses the lead by example, delegation, charisma, teachability, respect, qualities of leadership, courage, listening, and relationship building skills to interact with people and achieve results.

The thread that runs through all key factors that determine success and failure: PEOPLE. People do matter. Projects typically do not fail or succeed because of technical factors or because we cannot get electrons traveling faster than the speed of light; they fail or succeed depending on how well people work together. When we lose sight of the importance of people issues, such as clarity of purpose, effective and efficient communications, and management support, then we are doomed to struggle. Engaged people find ways to work through all problems. The challenge for complete project managers is to create environments for people to do their best work.

The complete project manager needs to be both a leader and manager—covering both what to do (vision) and how (execution). This requires placing a priority on understanding and listening to people. Lead by example. Demonstrate a positive attitude. Cultivate relationships up, across, and down the organization.

Identify leadership qualities that have made a difference in your life—people who have influenced you. Study what they did. Be the "teachable" student who continuously learns and applies a flexible approach to leadership.

Know yourself, believe in yourself, take care of yourself first, and then take care of others.

## Personal Skills

Personal skills are those vital interaction competencies for dealing with people. The complete project manager possesses the aptitude, attitude, and networking skills to interact with people and achieve results.

Early in our careers, we demonstrated negative attitudes regarding our jobs and towards the projects we managed. That negative disposition generated more problems than advantages. We created negative images of ourselves in front of colleagues, team members and managers. Results were not good—transmitting negativism to managers and team members, tarnishing our reputations, and limiting our options.

The maturing process led us to change our thinking. We needed an attitude check! By changing attitude, we changed our worlds (see Bucero, 2010). This is a fundamental, life changing experience.

Project managers need to be able to motivate and sustain people. Project team members will look to the project manager to solve problems and help remove obstacles. Complete project managers need to be able to address and solve problems within the team, as well as those that occur outside the team. Effective networking is a vital ingredient for success.

Here is the essence of persuasive skills: it usually makes great sense to repay favors, behave consistently, follow the lead of similar others, favor the requests of those we like, heed legitimate authorities, and value scarce resources.

Being focused on your strengths is a worthy approach that helps you grow personally and professionally, more so than any other "development plan." All time and money spent to take you to the next level of excellence as a project manager and as a professional are the best investments you can make in your personal career.

## The Role of Humor and Fun

The project manager walks into his boss's office and says, "Here is the bottom line budget needed for the success of the project." The boss asks, "What can you do for half the money?" The project manager says, "Fail." The boss asks, "When can you get started?" The project manager says, "I think I just did."

Observe your reaction to the previous paragraph. Did you laugh quietly, snicker, break out in a hearty laugh,…? People react differently, but just the process of telling that story makes an indelible impact on others. The dialogue between two people starts out very common place and takes an interesting turn, perhaps even one we wished we had the presence of mind to express. The humorous story sets the stage for addressing serious issues, such as success or failure.

We advocate for the use of humor and fun in a complete project manager's toolkit. We do so because we believe it is effective, productive, and memorable. We are not offering an exhaustive study and description of humor nor can we prescribe how to create fun in every situation. What we are doing is sharing our commitment to creating fun working environments, with the hope that others may validate and renew their commitment to the same or else come to a new understanding of the need for "lightening up" some of the serious work of project management.

Humor plays a vital role in getting a person to laugh at situations that may seem overwhelming. One cannot truly laugh and still retain anger or hostility. A project manager's toolkit is more complete when fun is on the agenda, and every day includes laughter. Life in general and projects specifically seem to flow better and accomplish more when people have fun doing whatever they are doing. Possibly no other single factor provides more benefits than humor and fun. Health, both personally and organizationally, is improved. People want to work together again when they know the experience includes having fun.

Humor may be experienced through the telling of jokes but also may happen through paying attention and making the commitment to the moments in projects that deserve a good laugh. Think differently about various moments encountered throughout a project. Seek a fun path that lightens the load while remaining on target.

## Project Management Skills

Complete project managers build upon the foundation established by PMI's *Guide to the Project Management Body*
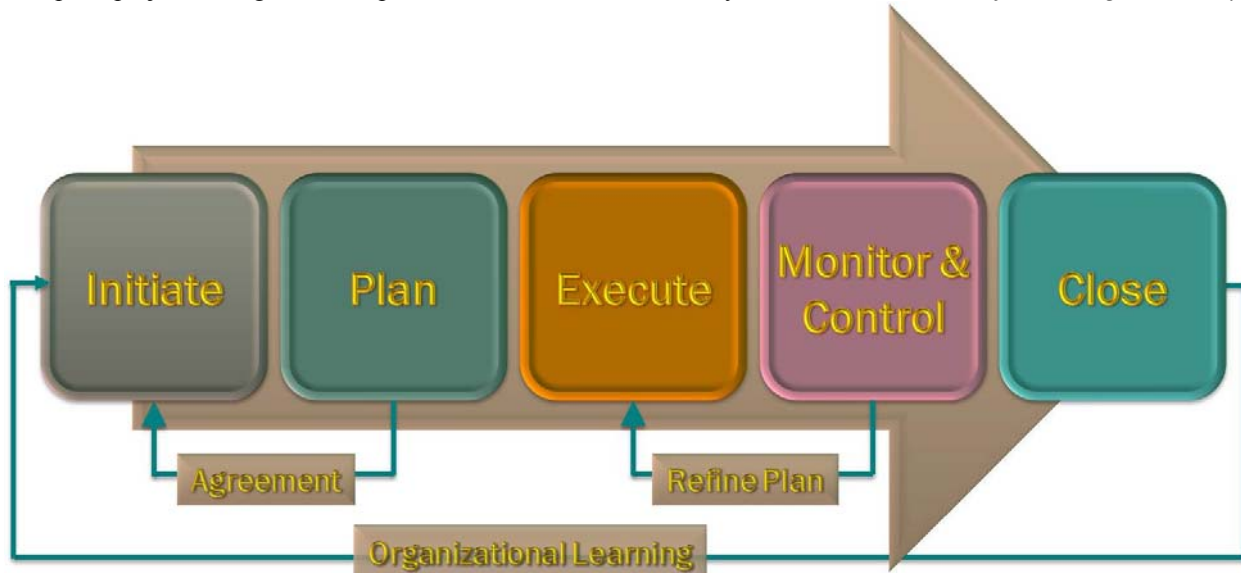


**Exhibit 2 The Project Management Process**

*of Knowledge* (see Exhibit 2). Our goal is to add insights and examples as aids for complete project managers in their quest to make sense of and apply the *PMBOK*®.

Competence is the ability to perform a specific task, action or function successfully. We live difficult business times, so organizations are looking for competent project managers. Project management competence goes beyond words. It is leader's ability to say it, plan it, and do it in such a way that others know that you know how, and know that they want to follow you. And you close the loop to learn from each project. People admire project managers who display high competence spanning not only the project management process but also related and necessary

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disciplines. They are professionals always ready to learn and always moving one step beyond. They are people who overcome a fear of making mistakes, people able to recognize better ways to get the job done, and they are able to learn from successes and failures and from others. Competence is a key to credibility, and credibility is the key to influence others. Most team members will follow competent project managers.

A common shortcoming is to focus on a benefit you are providing (an output) and not articulating the benefit of the benefit (the outcome—value in business terms). Outputs are actual deliverables or products/services. Outcomes are the success criteria or measurable result of successful completion of the outputs. Emphasis is often placed on collecting outputs with little attention paid to outcomes. But outputs may have little intrinsic value unless they are linked to outcomes. For example, a complete project manager might state, "By initiating a project office to coordinate our portfolio of projects [output], we select the right projects to meet our strategic goals and provide the key set of services required by our end users [outcome]." These statements have a strong project management process behind them.

## Environment Skills

More systemic and widespread progress is possible than in any other area when complete project managers focus attention on creating project-friendly environmental conditions. The same approaches applied by equally talented managers may have quite different outcomes depending upon the culture, operating principles, structure, customs, procedures, and values in place. We refer not to the physical environment but to the surrounding interrelationships among people that permeate how and what happens in an organization. These are the man-made artifacts that overlay the physical environment.

It is increasingly likely that multicultural teams become the norm in most environments. The complete project manager needs to be sensitive to the impact of culture on every project…and how to create an effective culture.

Complete project managers embrace chaos as a natural operating force. A firm grasp of purpose is the means to prosper in any environment. It is also important to take social responsibility for being a good citizen in the larger context of the surrounding environment.

To be successful, it is necessary to assess the current environment (see Graham and Englund, 2004) and understand the forces driving all behaviors. With this knowledge in place, it becomes possible to know how to approach project based work with a higher probability of success, based upon reality based knowledge of how people operate in a specific environment. Putting this knowledge to work happens in preparing and executing action plans.

Consider the multiplicative effect of these elements of management attention on environmental operating climate, as described by Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee in *Primal Leadership* (pp 17-18):

- In one study, climate alone accurately sorted companies into high versus low profits and growth in *75 percent* of cases.  x
- Climate—how people feel about working at a company—can account for 20 to *30 percent* of business performance.                x
- The actions of the leader account for 50 to *70 percent* of how employees perceive their organization's climate.              =

These suggest a leader's actions can predict up to **16 percent** of an organization's performance (.75 x .30 x .70 = .16). That is a significant compounding effect that deserves attention about where to spend time on environmental improvement programs.

## Organizational Skills

An imperative facing complete project managers in all organizations is not only to embark on a quest to manage project management processes, but also to execute projects within "green" organizations that encourage project-based work. A "green" organization is better positioned not only to survive but to prosper, even in difficult times.

To reach this state, leaders need to eliminate pollutants and "toxic" actions that demotivate people and teams. It also means that those people on this path search with unrelenting curiosity for leading practices. A "leading practice" is a process, action, or procedure that has not yet gained recognition as a best practice but it shows great potential as a better way to structure the organization and optimize results from project-based work. When these practices are revealed to you, it requires that you be prepared to take action.

Usage of "green" terminology in this context extends the physical, tangible thinking about our environment into the non-physical, intangible relationships that affect working environments among people in an organization. In this sense, "green" is good, productive, and desirable, allowing people to work as natural, organic living systems are intended to do. Examples would be:

- trust among colleagues and management is ever present
- cooperation instead of competition is the norm
- a common sense of purpose provides sustenance and meaning to all activities
- a shared vision brings clarity to the direction of work
- people fully communicate with each other regularly
- individuals are respected, able to express their creativity, and have power to influence others through positive persuasive techniques

On the other hand, "toxic" working environments are permeated by mistrust, failures to communicate, burdensome reporting requirements, misguided metrics, and cutthroat tactics. Negative political practices create uneasiness and frustration among all except those who wield them with power.

A toxic element might be managers who barely understand or appreciate the project management process, and they make demands or decisions that are short-sighted. A green element is leaders who engage their people in open discussion, and possible dissent, to determine the best way to proceed on a complex project.

We believe these "green" aspects are necessary for complete project managers to buy into, create, and support. Without this approach, people and organizations are often doomed to failures, overruns, and dissatisfied stakeholders. Each person has the power within him or her to embrace this thinking and act upon it every day.

## Negotiating Skills

The results delivered by projects depend upon what you negotiate. Everything is negotiable, both at work and in everyday lives. It is in your best interest, and for your team and organization, that you embrace negotiating as a requisite skill…and implement it dutifully. Negotiating is fun, and it is productive. As you develop negotiating skills via learning and practice, people come to respect you more rather than perceiving that you are challenging their professionalism. Take a negotiating course, read the books, change your attitude to apply the concepts, especially win-win, be prepared, patience, believe you ARE a good negotiator (of course each of us can improve but that is another story)..., and you will be grateful every day that you made this shift.

We see it over and over again how simply asking for something during a discussion results in a better outcome. The other party can always say no, and no harm is done. That party may say yes or counter propose, and each side is happy with the outcome. Get something in exchange for every concession. Complete project managers owe it to themselves and their partners to engage in negotiations. The time is now to view everything as negotiable.

## Political Skills

Complete project managers understand the power structure in their organizations. Clues to a power structure may come from an organizational chart, but how things get done goes far beyond that. Influence exists in people's hearts and minds, where power derives more from legitimacy than from authority. Its presence occurs in the implementation of decisions.

Improving organizational performance depends upon getting more accomplished through projects. Just what gets accomplished and how comes under the purview of power and politics. Organizations by their nature are political.

The political process is always at work in organizations. To be effective, project managers need to become politically sensitive. Encourage excellence in project sponsorship by managing up the organization (see Englund and Bucero, 2006).

Assessing the environment, rethinking attitudes towards power and politics, and developing an effective political plan are foundation steps. These help to address the power structure in an organization, identify critical stakeholder levels of trust and agreement, develop a guiding coalition, and determine areas of focus.

An overlay to the project management process is to prepare a political plan. This plan involves observing how an organization gets work done and performing stakeholder analysis. It further incorporates creative human dynamics to encourage proactive thinking about how to respond to and influence other people in the organization. Complete project managers develop political plans as well as effective project plans.

## Conflict Management Skills

In situations that matter the most, we often perform at our worst. A basic question to ask is, "What is at stake here?" To avoid failure, the solution is to conduct a *learning conversation* which means to engage in dialogue with a free flow of meaning. Exhibit 3 depicts the flow from challenges to options:
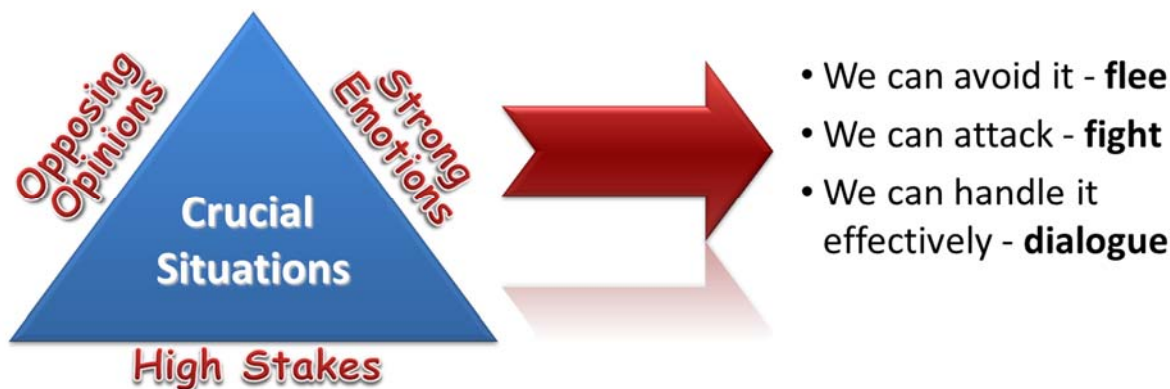


**Exhibit 3. Conduct a Learning Conversation**

Here are suggested steps for achieving dialogue in a learning conversation:

- Begin from the third story—not your story or the other person's story, but how an impartial observer would describe the conflict or situation; also could be an alternate story creating an ideal situation.
- Explain your purpose and extend an invitation. It is always wise to ask people if it is okay to give them feedback or share constructive criticism.
- Explore their story to demonstrate empathic understanding.
- Share your own story that brings personal learnings into the dialogue.
- Take the lead in problem solving.

## Sales Skills

Know that you are continuously in sales cycles throughout project life cycles. Be not a victim of lost sales or opportunities. Embrace the sales process as the means to secure necessary commitments in a genuine manner worthy of a complete project manager.

The classic sales approach, applicable to almost any environment, is to cover features, benefits, and advantages, as depicted in Exhibit 4. Seek compelling wording and arguments.

If you know not what the customer, team member, or sponsor most cares about, you may need to describe all features of your product, project, or solution. A better approach is to ask questions, listen, and then focus on what the other party truly cares about. Provide details, a prototype, or a demonstration so that person clearly understands what the key **features** of your proposal are. *"This Project Management Office (PMO) addresses a key deficiency in the organization by providing a complete document management and retrieval system. Let me show you how it works...."*

Describe the **benefits** that accrue after these features are implemented, *"This system relieves in-field consultants from time-consuming, low value-added activities, provides increased quality assurance within the project delivery process through access to most up-to-date documents, and serves as a breeding ground for knowledge sharing."*

Project how these benefits provide a competitive **advantage** for the organization, *"Implementing this system means our customers will be served by the latest technology with error free documentation, leading to more repeat business, and field consultants can spend more time addressing both existing and new customer requirements and turning them into sales."*



**Exhibit 4.  The Selling Process**

Steps in the selling process include:

- Use management-speak (when speaking to upper managers)
- Clearly identify problem
- Present compelling argument how features will produce benefits
- Cover the advantages of this approach
- Prompt and listen for feedback
- Close and get the order

Follow a selling process that facilitates relationship building with buyers.  Be dedicated to serve others and present to them what they really need.  Probe for issues through carefully crafted, open-ended questions.

## Change Management Skills

Project leaders do not like change any more than followers do unless, of course, it is their idea.  Change is hard for everyone. You cannot move forward and stay the same at the same time.  People resist change for several reasons:

People resist change because of personal loss.  A key obligation of a project manager is to talk to stakeholders about how that change will affect them.

People resist change because of fear of the unknown.  Project managers need to communicate both knowns and unknowns throughout project life cycles.

People resist change because they were not part of the decision-making or implementation design process or because of bad timing.  Consider using this checklist:

- Will this change benefit the team?
- Is the change compatible with the purpose of the project?
- Is this change specific and clear?
- Are the top 20% (the influencers) in favor of this change?
- Is it possible to test this change before making a total commitment to it?
- Are physical, financial, and human resources available to make this change?
- Is the change reversible?
- Is this change the next obvious step?
- Does this change have both short and long-term range benefits?

If too many questions have a no by them, then the timing may not be right.

People resist change because it feels awkward.  Accepting change as part of project lives means exposure to a variety of new and possibly uncomfortable situations.  A complete project manager is willing to experiment, assess personal and others' reactions and behaviors, and seek a path towards progress.

People resist change because of tradition. Many professionals have managed projects without applying a formal methodology for many years. Project results were not bad but not great either.  As organizations grow in terms of people and project complexity, the need arises to implement a formal PM methodology.

The keys to dealing with change successfully are having a good attitude toward it and being prepared to meet it. Understand the change management process:  create the conditions for change, make change happen, and make change "stick."  Change will happen whether you like it or not.  Without change there can be no improvement. Complete project managers make a commitment to pay the price for change.  Change needs to happen within you before it can happen around you.  It is never too late to change.

## Market and Customer Knowledge

Success in the market place is the usual source of positive cash flow. Successful projects bring vitality into an organization. As a key contributor to these outcomes, project managers are well advised to be aware of what is happening in the market and make appropriate decisions that positively influence the cash flow resulting from project outcomes. Although new product development projects are clearly linked to the market, most project outcomes end up in the market in one form or another. In the case of internal projects, the customer may be another department or division in the same organization. The end-user—the person who finally benefits from the project outcome—will be the customer of the project. When we talk about customer projects, the immediate customer is the client, and the final end-user will be the customers of that client. So, we mean the results of all projects end up competing in a market place.

What we must never forget is that customers pay the bills and our salaries. Bosses, of course, are important to our well-being and futures, but if customers go away or stop doing business with us, everybody suffers. Some people say there is only one true customer and that is the final purchaser of the outcome who pays real money for the product or service. We say there are internal customers as well who depend on project outputs and outcomes. Complete project managers have an obligation to attend to all customers.

All projects have a customer. Complete project managers take care to understand market forces and customer satisfaction issues that guide them on to successful projects. Apply servant leadership skills. Implement ethical practices in all interactions.

## Summary

Your fate as a complete project manager is up to you.  We have opened doors, proposed a structure, and shared thoughts, insights, experiences, and stories.  As depicted in the ever expanding molecular structure of organic chemistry, as well as the potential of social networking, infinite combinations are possible.  What will be your path?  Achieving completeness is an unending—and thoroughly satisfying—journey.  The rest of the story is in your hands….

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